

Providence Biltmore Hotel-  
Falstaff Room and Washington Street Entrance  
11 Dorrance Street  
Bounded by Dorrance, Eddy and  
Washington Streets  
Providence  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-49

HABS  
RI,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PROVIDENCE BILTMORE HOTEL -  
FALSTAFF ROOM/  
WASHINGTON STREET ENTRANCE

HABS No. RI-49

Location:

11 Dorrance Street, bounded by Dorrance,  
Eddy and Washington Streets, Providence,  
Providence County, Rhode Island  
USGS Providence Quadrangle, Universal  
Transverse Mercator Coordinates:  
19.299560.4632870

Present Owner:

Providence Hotel Associates  
1500 Fleet Center  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Present Use:

Hotel

Statement of  
Significance:

The Providence Biltmore Hotel was by far the most modern structure in Providence at the time of its completion in 1922. It was not only the tallest building in Providence, but its facilities and technical improvements were also a great advance on earlier Providence hotel norms. Following its opening in June 1922, the Biltmore quickly became the gathering place for Rhode Island business, industry, government and social communities.

The corridor from Washington Street to the area that now serves as the lobby retains its original configuration and much of its simple detail. This passage-way is significant as a reminder of the original program of the hotel, with its principal public rooms located above street level. The corridor was the only space on street level integrated into the interior design of the hotel.

The Falstaff Room is a barroom dating to the mid-1930's. Its architectural and design elements create an "Olde Englishe" setting. The Falstaff Room harkens back in form and spirit to the paneled bars and grills of men's clubs and the men's grills of country clubs, many of which were done up in Queen Anne or generic Tudor style. During the 1930's, revivalist settings were coming into increasing use for their associational possibilities, especially as a marketing tool. Probably little altered since the 1930's, the room remains intact as a bit of architectural merchandising and as a touchstone to twentieth-century social history.

### HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Biltmore Hotel was built in the early 1920's as a result of the initiative taken by Providence businessmen under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce. Throughout its history it has served as a converging point for the plexus of Rhode Island commercial, industrial, and social interests. Its importance to the twentieth-century history of commerce, architecture, and social attitudes, especially in the context of downtown Providence, is crucial.

Following the turn of the twentieth century, the first class hotel began to emerge as a symbol of the progressive civic spirit. As early as 1907, Henry James speculated on

the possibilities of the hotel -- for which the American spirit has found so unprecedented a use and a value; leading it on to express so a social, indeed positively an aesthetic ideal, and making it so, at this supreme pitch, a synonym for civilization, for the capture of conceived manners themselves, that one is verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just be the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself.

While James' musings were inspired by giant New York hotels -- the recently completed Waldorf-Astoria in particular -- by the second decade of this century the possession of a first class facility became crucial to local boosters in smaller cities across the country: "Of course every town in the country with a sense of decency has a new hotel in these days.... The minute you arrive, the native who meets you begins booming the hotel to the skies."

With the great promotion of Providence as a manufacturing, commercial, and shipping center in the early years of the twentieth century, the need for a first-class hotel in the heart of the city became critical. While a number of hotels existed downtown, including the 250-room Narragansett Hotel (1878, William R. Walker, architect, now destroyed), none could provide the modern and efficient service of new hotels in New York, Boston, or even New Haven. The need for a new hotel was under discussion by 1915, but the intervention of World War I halted any action. In mid-1918, the Chamber of Commerce again took up the issue. A committee was formed to define specific needs, negotiations for the site were begun, and by January 1920 an agreement was reached between the Chamber of Commerce and a hotel management firm headed by John McE. Bowman and L.D. Wallick, noted New York entrepreneurs.

To raise money for the construction of the Biltmore, a committee headed by Arthur L. Aldred solicited the Providence business community for subscriptions of preferred stock, and by May 1920 approximately \$2.5 million had been pledged for the new hotel. The balance of the approximately \$5 million needed for completion of the hotel was obtained by mortgage and the sale of common stock. The expenses of fund drive and other incidentals were met by the Chamber of Commerce.

The feat of organizing the campaign and raising the money for the Biltmore by the Chamber of Commerce was hailed as "the greatest single achievement of Chambers of Commerce in the United States" at the Annual Meeting of the National Organization of Chamber of Commerce Secretaries in October, 1920. Never before had a project of such magnitude been successfully attempted by a Chamber of Commerce. The rapid success of the campaign reflected not only the concern of the Providence business community for adequate local facilities, but further emphasized the flourishing state of commerce in the area.

The building erected by the Providence Biltmore Corporation was by far the most modern structure in Providence. Not only was it the tallest building in Providence -- until 1928 when the Industrial Bank Tower was constructed on Kennedy Plaza -- but also its facilities and technical improvements were a great advancement over earlier Providence hotel norms.

The modernity of the building was largely due to the selection of the architectural firm Warren and Wetmore of New York. While Providence architectural patronage usually supported local architects, the New York firm was no doubt chosen because of its expertise in the field of hotel construction: to their credit by 1919 were New York's Grand Central Station, and the Commodore, Biltmore, and Pennsylvania Hotels in New York, the latter so zealously admired by Sinclair Lewis's George F. Babbitt. Warren and Wetmore provided the hotel with a large, modern, efficient kitchen on the second floor; the elevator bank at the center of the L-shaped tower, removed from immediate adjacency to the lodging rooms; a bath to each room; an up-to-date mechanical system in the basement; and fireproof construction.

As the second skyscraper in Providence -- the first being the Turk's Head of 1913 -- the Biltmore retains something of the scale of the downtown's smaller nineteenth-century buildings in its three-story base, but its plain sixteen-story tower heralds the simpler towers that would be built in the area later in this century, such as the Hospital Trust Tower and the Old Stone Bank Tower, both from the early 1970's.

Following its opening in June 1922, attended by 1200 persons representing business, industry, government, and society, the Biltmore quickly became the gathering place of each of these elements in the Rhode Island populace. During the week following its opening, for example, the Biltmore's facilities were booked for occasions as diverse as a dance and buffet supper by the Aero Club of Rhode Island, a Block-Aid Ball for Rhode Island Hospital, a New England Warehousemen's luncheon, a Brown University Cammarian Club dinner, and Mrs. A. Gorman's whist and shower party.

The Biltmore continued to be a site of numerous testimonial dinners, conventions, and parties. A testimonial dinner recorded on film was held for Edward M. Fay, the dean of Rhode Island showmen, in 1947. New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was honored by the Rotary Club in 1939 at the Biltmore. And until its demise in 1969, the Debutante Assembly Hall presented young women to Providence society each December in the Biltmore ballroom.

During the 1920's the Biltmore achieved some national attention when L. D. Wallick, manager of the hotel, successfully operated a vegetable garden and poultry farm on the roof of the hotel's tower. Begun as a hobby, the venture flourished, and the hotel was soon able to provide its guests with fresh eggs, chickens, ducks, and vegetables in season. A large cutting garden provided fresh flowers for the public and guest rooms. Plans for a small dairy herd never materialized. The roof garden was not without its problems, however, such as the occasional escape of violently flapping chickens over the parapet into Washington street traffic and the 1927 exodus of the entire flock of ducks to Narragansett Bay. Despite these problems, the roof garden flourished well into the 1930's.

In 1947, the Biltmore was purchased by the Sheraton hotel chain, which continued to operate the hotel through the early 1970's.

During the late 1960's, the hotel fell on hard times. Declining use of the railroad; decentralization of business, retail, and industrial activities; and the same quest for modernity that brought the Biltmore into being in the 1920's militated against the continuing success of the Biltmore, and the hotel finally closed in January 1975.

By 1976, however, interest in downtown Providence focused on the revitalization of the area as a whole, spurred on by publications such as Interface: Providence, activities in the Mayor's Office of Community Development, programs by the

Providence Preservation Society, and the interest of business groups with financial stakes in the continuing use of the downtown. The Biltmore was purchased in September 1976 by Biltmore Hotel Associates, a limited partnership, the general partners of which were wholly-owned subsidiaries of Textron, Incorporated; The Outlet Company; Providence Journal Company; and the Business Development Company. The hotel management firm, Hotels of Distinction, Incorporated, was retained by the consortium to renovate the hotel. The Boston architectural firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbot, and the Providence firm, Morris Nathanson Design, refurbished the hotel in a manner sympathetic to the architectural character of the building. The elaborate interior detailing was maintained, and structural changes limited to the installation of a glass-front elevator at the inside corner of the tower and the removal of the main entrance staircase, obviated by the transfer of the entrance lobby and registration desk from the second floor to ground level.

In 1986, as in 1922, the key to a prosperous downtown is the continuing success of those enterprises located there.

#### DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

The Biltmore Hotel, completed in 1922, is a key visual landmark in downtown Providence. Occupying a triangular block bounded by Dorrance, Washington, and Eddy Streets, the hotel is located at the western end of Kennedy Plaza and faces Burnside Park, a major green space in downtown Providence. The building is adjacent to Union Station and the central business district.

The brick structure is composed of two distinct building blocks. The first three stories of the building, containing stores and public rooms, occupy the full site, and the main entrance facade fills the length of the hypotenuse of the triangle along Dorrance Street. The lodging rooms, which begin at the fourth floor, are contained in an L-shaped tower which rises nineteen stories along the Washington and Eddy Street sides of the site; the front of the Washington Street wing -- i.e., facing Dorrance Street -- is slightly bowed its entire height. The roofs of both the three-story block and the tower are flat, with protective parapets around the perimeter. A small service structure is on the roof of the tower in the corner of the L.

In accordance with newly implemented fire codes, the Biltmore was built entirely of fireproof materials. The steel frame structure is sheathed in Harvard brick, with fireproof plaster

walls inside, and metal doors and window sashes; decorative trim is of fireproof molded plaster inside and stone outside.

The style of the building, publicized at the time as having the "spirit of the 'Greek Revival,'" can be more accurately described as rather dry Beaux-Arts Neo-Federal. The greatest part of the building, both exterior and interior, is unadorned, but classically derived detailing is used within and without to emphasize public and ceremonial spaces.

Exterior articulation is dependent upon the tripartite base-column-capital format so common in early skyscrapers. This format is reinforced by the wall adornment, which is limited to the three lower and two upper stories and further identifies the public rooms from the exterior. The format of the entrance facade on Dorrance Street is derived from the Italian baroque palazzo with its basement first story and piano nobile above. The first floor provides access to the building and space for shops, and its unadorned wall surface is broken only by entrances and shop windows. The second and third floors, containing restaurants and offices, are screened by an arcade of pairs of massive engaged Corinthian columns; between each of these pairs is a two-story, roundheaded window. While the arcading fills only the Dorrance Street elevation, the definition of the piano nobile is carried around the circumference of the building through a continuation of the massive entablature in a wide stringcourse above the third story and the use of stone surrounds on the second-story windows. This articulation of the facade not only emphasizes the functional importance of this part of the building, but further provides a visual link with other buildings in Kennedy Plaza which rely in varying degrees on the same palazzo format, notably the Providence City Hall, just across Washington Street to the south, and the Federal Building at the east end of Kennedy Plaza.

The third through sixteenth floors are sheathed in brick, and the wall surface is punctuated only by the regular rows of steel-sash, one-over-one windows -- which replace the original casement windows -- and the low-relief brick quoining at the corners of the building.

The top two floors, the location of the ballroom and small function rooms, are set off from the simple brick walls on the lower stories of the tower by a stone stringcourse with Greek fretwork just above the sixteenth floor. Regularly spaced two-story round-headed windows, separated by thin Ionic pilasters, rise above the stringcourse, again providing both definition of the public rooms within and a visual stop for the shaft of the tower.



When the Biltmore Hotel opened in June of 1922, the street level had little programmatic relation to the rest of the hotel. The principal entrance on Dorrance Street gave access directly to a main staircase that led to the main lobby at the mezzanine level. A secondary entrance located on Washington Street provided access to the main staircase through a long, barrel-vaulted corridor. The balance of space on this level was rented, according to contemporary accounts, to shops and a brokerage house. Only gradually through the twentieth century has the street level been incorporated into hotel use.

The corridor from Washington Street to what is now the main lobby retains its original configuration and much of its simple detail. The corridor has a simple cornice, and its ceiling is vaulted from just inside the Washington Street doorway (its original door replaced with a later, metal, revolving door) to just beyond the point where the hall makes a forty-five degree turn to connect with what is now the lobby. This passageway's significance is as a reminder of the original program of the hotel, with its principal public rooms located above street level; indeed, this was the only space on street level that was integrated into the interior design of the hotel and uses -- in very much stripped-down form -- the vaguely Adamesque/neo-Federal vocabulary used in the other original public spaces.

The Falstaff Room is a barroom paneled in dark wood and dating to the mid-1930s. The room is divided by piers into two distinct sections: on the north is a bar extending much of the length of the room below a large mural, and on the south is a seating area. Both of these areas are paneled, though the quality and type of the paneling varies between the two sections, and the ceiling in both sections is coffered. A small vestibule with partial-height paneled walls on the south and west separates the entrance from the corridor to the east of the room. The introduction of a fireplace, centered on the south wall, and the use of Tudor arches, stained glass in the windows that flank the fireplace, and ceiling coffering create an "Olde Englishe" setting in keeping with the name of the room whose namesake is juicily portrayed in the large mural over the bar. This mural, too, reinforces the particularly masculine ambience -- and, indeed, unescorted women were forbidden entrance to the room for many years -- associated with jovial imbibing, a phenomenon that remained a male preserve until the 1920s and 1930s when the cocktail hour became an important accoutrement to fashionable life. But this room does not partake of this modern aspect of alcoholic socializing; rather, it harkens back in form and in spirit to the paneled bars and grills of men's clubs and the men's grills of country clubs, many of which were done up in

Queen Anne or generic Tudor style. Indeed, it is this architectural associationalism that is key to understanding the room, which relied heavily on the creation of a stage-like setting appropriate to the activity that was to occur here. During the 1930's, revivalist settings were coming into increasing use for their associational possibilities, especially as a marketing tool. To that end, the quality of the design and the craftsmanship is less important than the overall effect of the room to lure customers to an appealing atmosphere. Probably little altered since the 1930's, the room remains intact as a bit of architectural merchandising and as a touchstone to twentieth-century social history.

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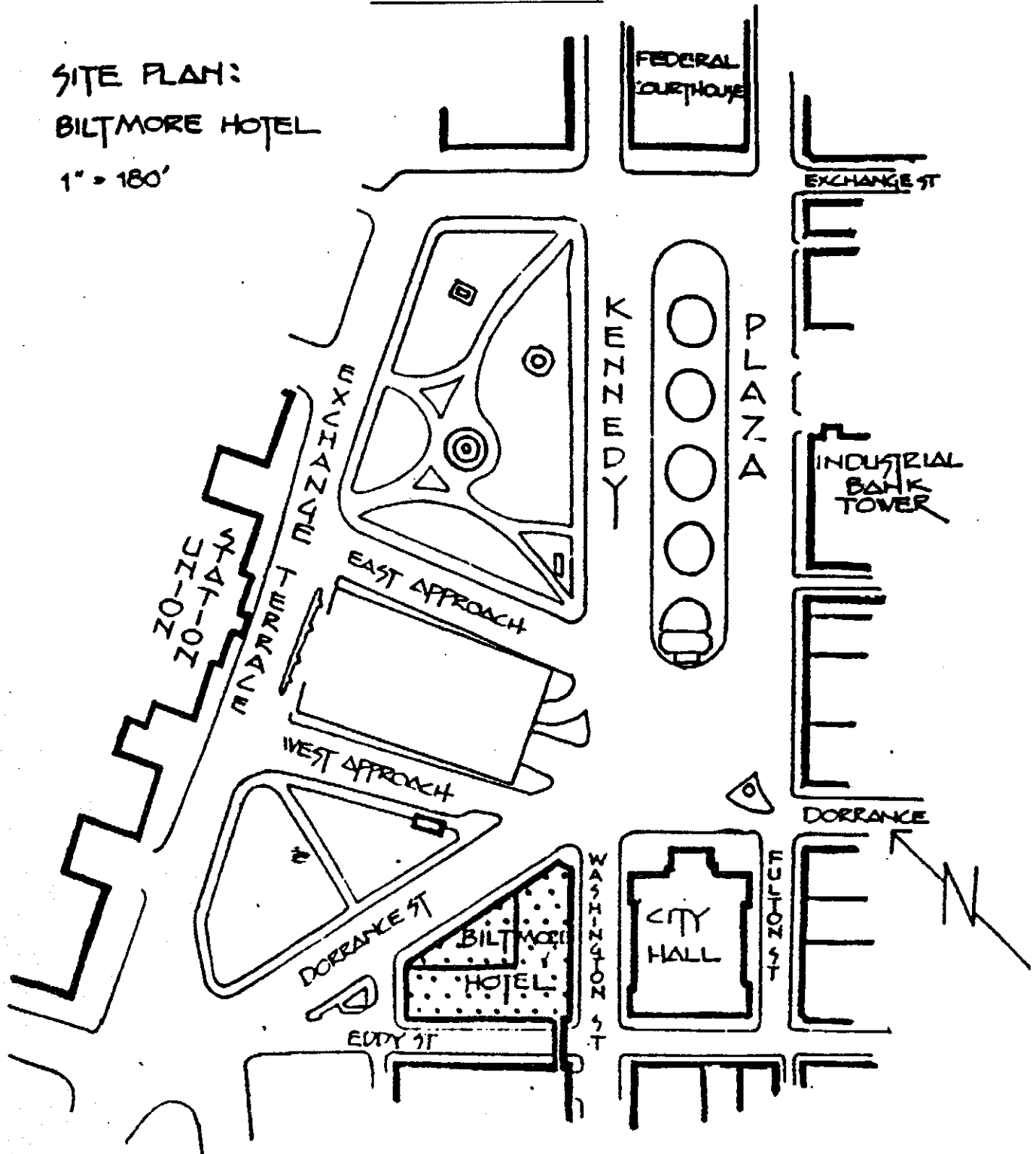
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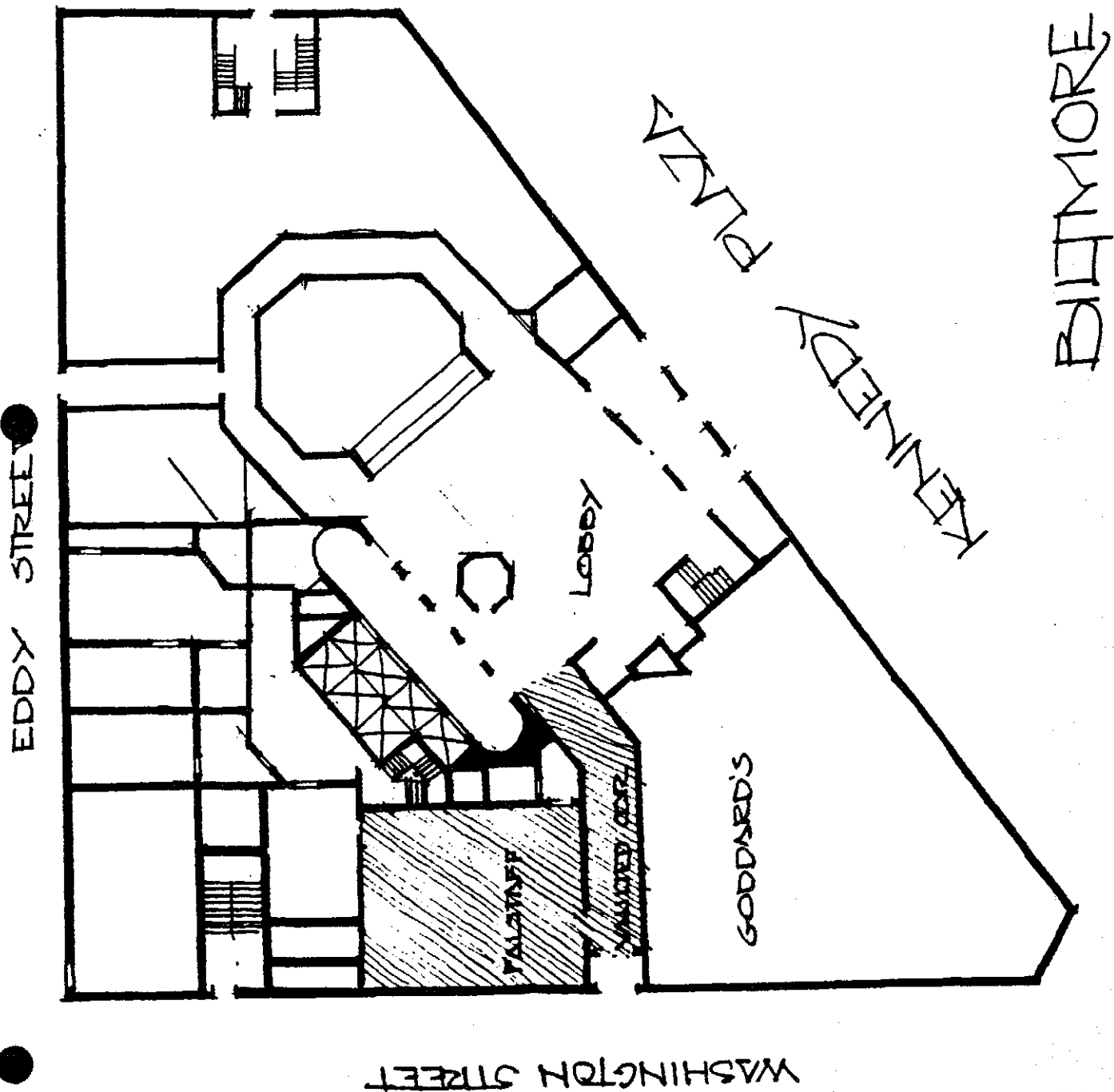
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Sketch Site Plan

SITE PLAN:  
BILTMORE HOTEL  
1" = 180'



PROVIDENCE BILTMORE HOTEL -  
FALSTAFF ROOM/WASHINGTON  
STREET ENTRANCE  
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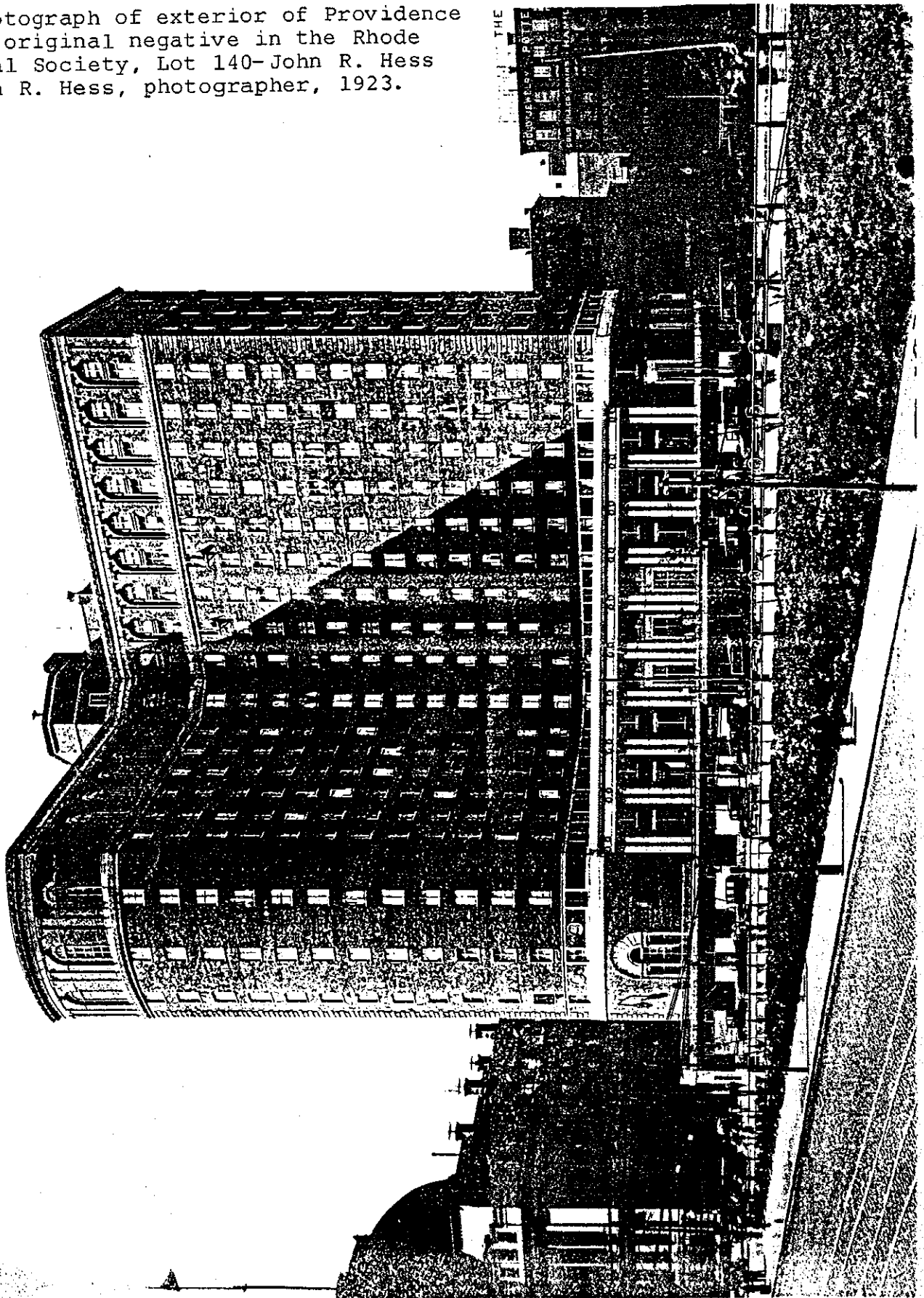
Perspective of the Proposed Providence Biltmore Hotel.

Providence Biltmore Hotel Company, 1920; Rhode Island  
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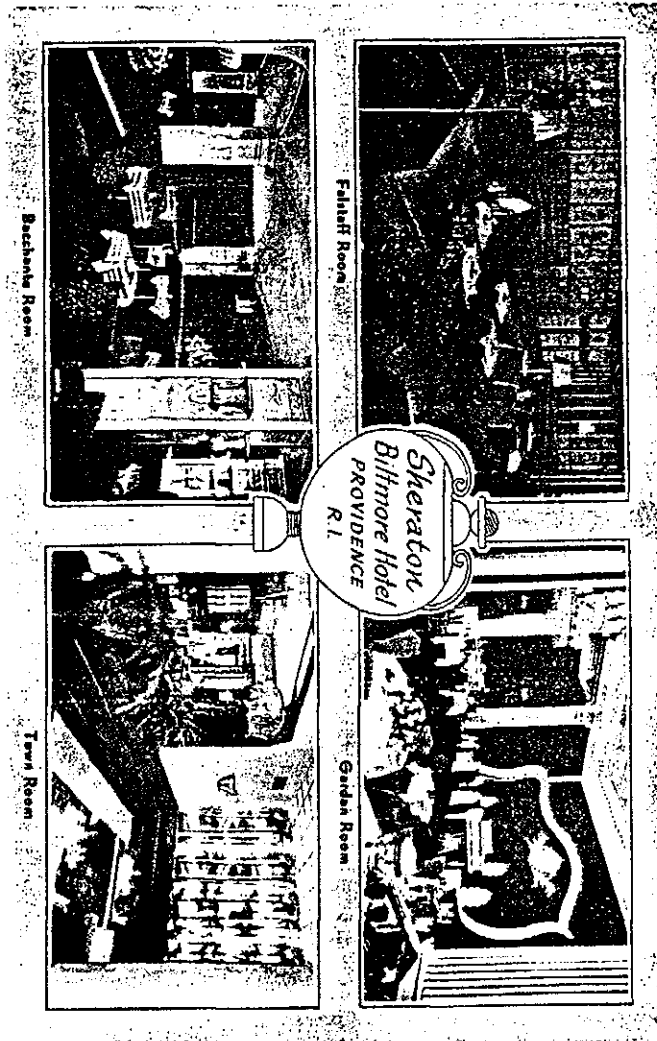
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Photocopy of photograph of Washington Street entry-  
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